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INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6047
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 2073
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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS: DEBATE SHARPENS ECUADOR'S CHOICE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite the staid format of a televised CNN debate on October 5, the exchange sharpened contrasts among the top four contenders. Alvaro Noboa, regarded as a fairly poor debater, exceeded expectations by taking the offensive against Correa, while Leon Roldos and Cynthia Viteri made little news courting their bases. The debate probably helped Noboa emerge as the most viable alternative to a Correa victory in the first round. Front-runner Rafael Correa also made headlines during and after the presidential debate denying the FARC is a terrorist group, provoking an immediate reaction from Bogota. End Summary.

Format, Dynamics

¶2. (U) The less than hour-long live debate was televised with commercial breaks by a local channel and on CNN in Espanol, with a potential audience of 20 million. The format was somewhat stilted, with responses limited to one minute and follow-up questions not apportioned evenly. All four top candidates responded to the same questions, with the exception of Viteri, who was cut off on the last question due to time constraints. Noboa and Roldos chose to linger afterwards and mingle at the reception, packed with Quito's elites. Roldos greeted pre-positioned cheering crowds from the balcony of Quito's elegant Teatro Sucre.

Thrown Fruit--Noboa Takes the Offensive

¶3. (SBU) After a shaky start commenting on Correa supporters tossing tangerines outside the theater (effectively countered by Correa), Noboa regained his footing, drawing laughs with a promise to pelt Correa with bananas in the second round. More chuckles ensued among the elite audience, under strict orders of silence, with Noboa's sarcastic reference to Correa as "Colonel Correa," (a reference to Correa's links to Chavez). It is less clear if Noboa, a self-financed billionaire, scored with his demands that the "millionairio" campaigns of Correa and Roldos reveal their list of donors and campaign spending. (Noboa is outspending both).

¶4. (SBU) Noboa did win rare points for ideological clarity, saying flatly that his government would not seek relations with Venezuela or Cuba ("I'm no hypocrite") and that he would sign an FTA with the U.S. and not put the issue to a referendum. Corrupt officials would be sent to Cuba as punishment, he joked, emphasizing his antipathy to Castro's regime. Noboa added another jab at Correa late in the

debate, noting that while "Ecuadorians are hungry, and are tired of the blah blah blah" of intellectuals like Correa.

Correa Caught Out on FARC

¶ 15. (SBU) Correa separated himself from the field on his plans for radical reform, a constituent assembly, and his anti-FTA stance. He linked himself publicly to the full gamut of Latin American leftist leaders, including Chavez, and was the only candidate to defend instability, or more specifically the right of the people to overthrow presidents who have "betrayed" national interests or their campaign promises. Pressed for having said a Constituent Assembly would be free to decide whether to ditch the dollar, Correa came off defensively trying to put the quote into context. He deflected a direct question about Chavez by noting that the U.S. is Venezuela's largest trade partner.

¶ 16. (U) Later, in a television interview the next day, Correa confirmed that he does not consider the FARC a terrorist organization, but rather "guerrilleros." Correa decried ignorance on the topic and pointed out that the GOE has always stopped short of calling the FARC terrorists, saying that would be tantamount to involving themselves in a neighbor's internal conflict. The Department's classification of the FARC as a terrorist organization, Correa claimed, was done to permit U.S. troops to deploy to any part of the world to combat them. "The moment we classify the FARC as a terrorist group, we open the doors for a U.S. invasion and also declare war on the FARC, involving us in a problem that is not ours." Correa's statements drew comment from Colombian VP Francisco Santos, who told the press that Correa's claim did "more harm to Ecuador than to Colombia."

Roldos and Viteri Appeal to Stability, Women

¶ 17. (U) Roldos' repeatedly emphasized his personal probity, stability and good governance and promoted "positive" change. At one point Roldos held out to the cameras his "clean hands," citing his personal example and honesty. Viteri, meanwhile, explicitly appealed for the women's vote, promising to "put a woman's face" on governance. She joined Correa in demanding Colombian compensation for health effects of fumigations on the border.

Comment

¶ 18. (SBU) Correa's aides immediately sought to counter the blowback from his FARC statement (including by immediate clarifying text messages to journalists -- a sign of the campaign's effective Mexican-run "war room" operation) by pointing out (correctly) that his position went no further than that of the GOE, which also refuses to classify the FARC as terrorist. But it made for a day of press attention that threw them off message. In the debate, Correa appears to have been hurt by increasingly high expectations of his supporters. Having outshone his opponents in wit and erudition in two previous televised debates, Correa seemed less impressive in this less flexible format. Noboa, in contrast, probably won a bounce by exceeding low expectations based on his previous performances.

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